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"I WOULD KILL IN GOD'S NAME:" ROLE OF SEX, WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, REPORT OF A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND LIMBIC LABILITY[1]

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Summary.—Data collected during the last 15 years for the Personal Philosophy Inventory from 1.48 thousand university men ($n=629$) and women ($n=853$) were analyzed to discern the response characteristics of individuals who stated "yes" to Item 136 "If God told me to kill, I would do it in His name." The percentage (7%, range between 2% and 8% per year) of affirmative responses did not change significantly over time. The odds ratio for men:women for an affirmative response was 1.4:1. As predicted a four-way interaction for sex, weekly church attendance, history of a religious experience, and elevated complex partial epileptic-like signs was statistically significant. Of the men who reported a religious experience, attended church weekly, and displayed elevated complex partial epileptic like signs (5.7% of all males), 44% stated they would kill another person if God told them to do so.

If the profound, personal meaningfulness of god experiences are generated by electrical transients within the amygdaloid-hippocampal regions of the temporal lobes (Persinger, 1983), then individuals who report other indicators by which we infer elevations of this form of neurocognitive lability may interpret unusual or unexpected natural events with exaggerated personal and philosophical significance (Persinger, 1987). One historical example was the unusually bright Leonid meteor shower during November 1833 which was interpreted as the harbinger of the end of the world and generated several religious movements (Rao, 1995). Millennial anticipations have been reinforced by the appearance of unusual comets such as Hale-Bopp and will be exacerbated by an unprecedented intense Leonid display expected during mid November between the years 1997 and 1999 (Rao, 1995) and by the predicted solar maximum and its myriad concomitant geomagnetic perturbations during January through March of the year 2000. Unusual and even bizarre explanations for these natural events may achieve religious or cosmic profundity.

Wars, a form of group conflict within *homo sapiens*, have been responsible for the death of more than 100 million people within the last century. Although wars may be driven by economic and political variables, the capacity to maintain the group dynamics is strongly determined by the manipulation of religious beliefs. Religious belief systems, which could be considered the social representation of normal individual egocentricism, encourage an association between personal immortality and the total validity of the culture's god (Persinger, 1987). The discrimination of "signs," particularly if they are paired with religious beliefs, can be and have been interpreted as justifications for killing other human beings particularly during periods of economic or social uncertainty (Persinger & Lafreniere, 1977). Elimination of other, competitive groups who do not endorse the same god or definition encourages the inference that the surviving person's belief is more valid and hence its consequences (immortality) are more ensured.

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This study was designed to discern the baseline proportion of the population who state they would kill another human being if God told them. The following information was extracted from our data base of the Personal Philosophy Inventory for 1,482 university students: Item 136 ("If God told me to kill, I would do it in His Name"), Item 50 ("I go to church at last once a week during most months"), Item 35 ("I have had a religious experience I know was real"), gender, religious affiliation, the cluster of 16 items that comprise the indicator of complex partial epileptic-like experiences indicator and the cluster of 16 control items that was employed as a covariate for nonspecific "yes" responding (Persinger & Makarec, 1986, 1993). The former continuum was trichotomized. Bizarre responders (yes to Item 58: I have been taken aboard a spaceship, 0.8% of the population) were excluded from this study. There were 629 men and 853 women (age $M = 23.8$ yr., $SD = 7.5$). The primary hypothesis was people who are more constrained by institutionalized beliefs (attend church frequently) are infused by personal conviction (a "real" religious experience), exhibit a proclivity for complex partial epileptic symptoms, and are males would be more compelled to kill another human if they experienced "a sign" or cosmic instruction attributed to God.

The data had been collected yearly from 1982 through 1996. All analyses involved SPSS software. Chi-squared analyses indicated no significant differences ($\chi_{14}^2 = 15.18$, $p > .05$) between the years for a yes response to the item "If God told me to kill, I would do it in His name." The odds ratio for men:women stating they would kill in God's name was 1:42 (95% confidence interval = 1.11 to 1.80); the sex difference was equivalent to a *phi* coefficient of .09 ($p < .001$). Hierarchical loglinear analysis between denomination (Roman Catholic 55%, Protestant 29%, Noncommitted 10%, and Infrequent, e.g., Pentecostal, Baptist, Islamic 6%) sex and the response to the question gave no statistically significant ($p > .05$) two-way or three-way interactions. Consequently, denomination did not directly affect the proportion of yes responses.

The results of a four-way analysis of variance for the yes response to Item 136 as a function of weekly church attendance, the history of a religious experience, complex partial epileptic-like experiences, and sex supported the hypothesis. There was a statistically significant four-way interaction ($F_{2,1458} = 5.13$, $p < .001$). *Post hoc* analyses indicated that the major source of the difference was the marked increased proportion of men who had a religious experience, who attended church weekly, and who displayed complex partial epileptic-like experiences within the middle-third or upper-third of the trichotomy. The proportion of responders for these two groups ($n = 18$ each, total $n = 36$) who said they would kill in God's name if God told them to do so was 44% compared to the other cells (groups) whose values ranged from 0 to 13%.

All of the main effects were statistically significant ($p < .001$). A greater proportion of yes responding occurred for people who attended church weekly ($F_{1,1458} = 40.45$, $p < .001$), who had a religious experience that was real ($F_{1,1458} = 8.24$, $p = .004$), who displayed more complex partial epileptic-like experiences ($F_{2,1458} = 5.57$, $p < .01$), and who were men ($F_{1,1458} = 18.71$, $p < .001$) The combined main effects accommodated only 5% of the variance (*eta* = 0.23). There was a statistically significant two-way interaction between church attendance and sex ($F_{1,1458} = 13.24$, $p < .001$) and three-way interaction among religious experience, sex, and complex partial epileptic-like experiences ($F_{2,1458} = 5.47$, $p < .01$); the cell means reflected the results of the four-way interaction.

Covariance for yes responding as inferred by the proportion of responses endorsed within the control cluster did not appreciably alter the statistical significance of any of the effects. Loglinear analysis verified the statistically significant four-way interaction (Pearson $\chi_{11}^2 = 23.27$, $p < .01$) for religious experience, sex, and complex partial epileptic-like phenomenology with willingness to kill (partial $\chi_2^2 = 11.10$, $p = .003$) as well as the interaction (partial $\chi_2^2 = 7.24$, $p < .05$) for the latter three variables with regular church attendance.

The existence of God is an empty hypothesis because the definition always employs the

culture's linguistic defaults for concepts of nonphysical and infinity. Consequently, the hypothesis is never testable; the absence of this testability does not demonstrate or even imply its validity. Despite the delusional characteristics of beliefs in God's existence, the occurrence of unusual environmental, familial, and personal events which avoid death or minimize anxiety for the experient are frequently attributed to this invisible, nonphysical, and untestable source.

Complete acceptance of an "instruction" from God as a cosmic consent to kill another person has been challenged by the research that the sense of a presence, which is often attributed to deities due to cultural labels, can be simulated by applying complex, weak magnetic fields over the right hemisphere (Cook & Persinger, 1997). Although these experiments do not necessarily refute God's existence were the definition testable, the possibility that God-attributed experiences and "instructions" are artifacts of brain function (Persinger, 1983) suggests a more cautious interpretation of their validity.

This caution should be considered seriously if even a small proportion of the people who responded affirmatively to the god-kill item would actually execute the behavior within an approved context. The estimated prevalence of these individuals within university populations could include millions of "educated" men and women. Were these results generalizable, then one out of every 20 university men would be willing to kill another person were the instruction attributed to God.

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